

IN THE NEWS

EXPO SHOWS GROWING POWER OF HISPANIC BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Rob Kirkbride
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PRESS PHOTO/EMILY ZOLADZ

Welcome to the fair: Alma Valdez, of Grand Rapids, talks with Juan Espinosa, of East Lansing, as he visits the National City booth at the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Expo Thursday in DeVos Place.

Expo shows growing power of Hispanic business community

West Michigan group
cultivates entrepreneurial
spirit, opportunities
for networking

BY ROB KIRKBRIDE
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — When Oswaldo Garces started Clean Tech, a Grand Rapids janitorial service, he had no one to turn to for questions he had about running a business.

He does now.

Garces said his membership in the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce "is like replacing the time I didn't go to college to study business."

"The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is my family," said Garces, whose business is now 13 years old.

There was a family gathering Thursday of the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

The group had its fourth annual Business Expo and Job Fair at DeVos Place.

The event brought together Hispanic-owned businesses looking to network with other firms.

It also attracted businesses looking to attract the growing Hispanic population in West Michigan.

"The Hispanic business community in West Michigan is strong and getting stronger," Hispanic Chamber President Frank Coronado said.

"The buying power is in the millions, and it is going to continue to grow."

'Hunger and passion'

Noel Cuellar, president and chief executive officer of Primera Plastics Inc., sees himself in the faces of those attending the expo.

"One of the things we have to focus on is that hunger and passion," he said of cultivating the Hispanic community's entrepreneurial spirit.

"Some people tend to forget where they started from.

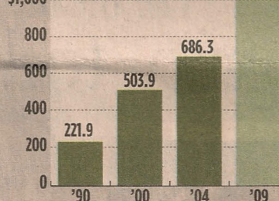
"I like to be a mentor to other business owners, to show them what we

Buying power

Hispanic buying power is skyrocketing, and businesses are lining up to serve the community.

Hispanic buying power

In billions



* Estimate
SOURCE: Selig Center for Economic Growth
at the University of Georgia

PRESS GRAPHIC/NANCY JONESFRANCIS

went through."

Cuellar, who used to work for Prince Corp. and learned about plastic injection molding at Grand Rapids

SEE HISPANIC, C2



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EXPO SHOWS GROWING POWER OF HISPANIC BUSINESS COMMUNITY (continued)



PRESS PHOTO/EMILY ZOLADZ

Network time: From left, Cindy Aguilar, of Zeeland; Noel Cuellar, of Holland; and Dante Villarreal, of Grand Rapids, talk Thursday at the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Expo at DeVos Place.

HISPANIC IT'S NOT DIVERSITY; IT'S INCLUSION

CONTINUED FROM C1

Community College, said managers at Zeeland-based Herman Miller Inc. encouraged and helped him get his business started.

Founded in 1994, Primera Plastics now has 140 employees, \$19 million in sales and a new 77,000-square-foot factory.

Still, Cuellar doesn't like to talk about diversity. He calls it inclusion.

"I was nervous when the (Michigan Civil Rights Initiative banning affirmative action) passed," he said.

"But I know there are still people out there that know that doing business with minority-owned companies is just good business."

Tom Almonte, the City of Grand Rapids' minority-women business enterprise developer, said businesses should

"The buying power is in the millions, and it is going to continue to grow."

— Frank Coronado,
Hispanic Chamber President

not ignore Hispanic buying power.

"If you're not doing business with or including the Hispanic population in your plans, you are going to see a decline in business," he said.

Almonte said the Hispanic population in Grand Rapids has grown 203 percent in the past decade.

"There is overwhelming power behind that," he said.

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FACT SHEET

Growing market

The West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on Thursday held its annual Business Expo and Job Fair in Grand Rapids.

- By 2050, Hispanics will not only be the country's largest minority group, but account for one-quarter of the U.S. population.
- The U.S. Hispanic population has increased from 22.3 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000.
- The local Hispanic population boomed during the past decade, more than doubling in Ottawa County to 16,700, and tripling in Kent County to more than 40,000.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau



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